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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 005144

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TAGS: MOPS PHUM IZ

SUBJECT: MCNS MEETING 21 DECEMBER 2005: OFF-RAMP
ANNOUNCEMENT, TRANSFER OF SECURITY RESPONSIBILITY, AVOIDING
A RESURGENCE OF VIOLENCE, AND HIGH VALUE DETAINEE RELEASES

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for Reasons 1.4 (A), (B), (D)
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¶11. (S) SUMMARY. During a December 21 MCNS meeting, participants discussed four issues. The Iraqis agreed to the scenario of announcing the off-ramp decision on Friday, December 23. We would prepare the text of a statement to be read publicly to the press at the end of a meeting with the PM. We deferred a decision on how to proceed with the document containing the conditions for transferring security responsibility, but agreed on the need for a brief summary statement for public release. The Iraqis debated ways to avoid a resurgence of violence, focusing on developing political steps and sustaining forceful security operations. Finally, a rancorous discussion ensued regarding the release of high value detainees. Ambassador stood firm on our obligation to release the detainees in the absence of evidence of any crime or security threat. He and General Casey forcefully stated that we had not facilitated travel of any detainee outside Iraq. The meeting concluded with the idea of forming a group to draw lessons from this issue and produce a joint public statement. END SUMMARY.

OFF-RAMP ANNOUNCEMENT

¶12. (S) MCNS met December 21. Iraqi representatives included PM Jafari, NSA Rubaie, MOD Dulime, MOI Jabr, and PM advisor Adnan Ali al-Kadhimi. Representation from the Coalition included Ambassador Khalilzad, MNF-I CG Casey, MNF-I DCG Houghton, UK Charge Torlot, and PolMilCouns Litt. CG Casey had sought the meeting primarily to discuss the off-ramp announcement. CG noted that we had discussed the issue with the PM, MOD and MOI several weeks ago, but they had urged MNF-I to delay the announcement of any decision until after the elections. CG said the USG would like to make the announcement on Friday during our DV visit. He reviewed the rationale for our decision, particularly the progress of the ISF on the ground, and he reaffirmed that this reduction in our presence would in no way impact our solid commitment to Iraq's security. CG also ran through the attendant risks of reducing, and of not reducing, our presence, concluding that now was the right time to take this step.

¶13. (S) Iraqi interlocutors firmly supported this initiative. The PM initially tried to make the case that the off-ramp should appear to be a joint decision and the result of the Iraqi government's deliberation and approval. Ambassador held firm to the position that adjustments in our force structure were our decision alone. The GOI was of course within its right to request the departure of all forces, but could not approve force adjustments. Eventually, the PM relented, and we agreed to craft language to be used in a joint press availability following the Friday meeting with the PM.

TRANSFER OF SECURITY RESPONSIBILITY

¶14. (S) A discussion ensued about the way ahead for the committee to transfer security responsibility. Dr. Rubaie said the joint committee's coordination of implementing procedures had made great progress and they were in an advanced stage. He noted that we agreed on the need to prepare a brief statement (one or two pages) that summarized for public release the document that contains the detailed conditions and the measures of assessment for whether a given province or provincial capital were ready for transfer. The only open question was the status of the document itself -- should it be signed, and if so, by whom? He said the PM had the authority to sign the document now, even though his formal agreement to it was given before the elections. Ambassador and General Casey said we would think over our position on this last point and let the MCNS know.

AVOIDING A RESURGENCE OF VIOLENCE

¶15. (S) The Iraqi participants spent some time debating ways to avoid a resurgence in violence after the pre-election lull. They all agreed that violence had declined as a result

of Euphrates River Valley operations, returning the Syrian border to Iraqi control, a successful political process including international support (e.g., from the Arab League), a political decision by insurgents to minimize acts of violence, and a growing political opinion in the Sunni population to give the political process a chance. The question was how to sustain this momentum. In the end all agreed on the need for undefined "political" steps to strengthen trust in government and bring back pride, honor and respect. The PM stressed that the government must focus on worst-case scenarios as it prepares such measures. Ministers Dulime and Jabr emphasized the need to continue security operations relentlessly. Dulime argued that, before the election, insurgents enjoyed support inside and outside Iraq as the perceived "resistance" to occupation. Now, after the elections, no one has an excuse to support insurgency. Ambassador suggested that representatives from the relevant organizations meet to outline specific suggestions on both the political and security tracks.

RELEASE OF HIGH VALUE DETAINEES

16. (S) At the end of the meeting, the PM somewhat heatedly plowed over old ground with respect to our release of high value detainees. We reiterated that we were obligated to do so since the detainees posed no security threat, and we had found no evidence of criminal activities. The Iraqi legal and political authorities had never presented us any valid warrants backed by evidence -- after almost eighteen months of our asking repeatedly for such evidence. The Ambassador and CG Casey stressed that no detainee had been transported outside Iraq by the Coalition, nor would be in the future. The PM alleged that our actions were an infringement of sovereignty and showed a lack of respect for Iraq. We reiterated that we were only releasing these detainees because according to international law we had no reason or authority to hold them, or to turn them over to Iraqi custody. The Iraqis were now free to arrest them if they had proper evidence to do so.

KHALILZAD